

The Holocaust Historiography Project

Admissions against Interest about the Holocaust

'St. Louis' passengers often survived the war

Tracing Fates of 907 Jews on Liner Turned Away in 1939

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In June 1939, Ilse Marcus was so tantalizingly close to the saving shores of the United States that she could see the palm trees of Miami.

But the American Government refused to provide a refuge for her and the 906 other German Jews aboard the St. Louis who were fleeing their homeland's Nazi terror. The ocean liner, which had already been turned away from Cuba, was forced to return to Europe, where the passengers were dispersed to Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Britain.

Until recently, the fate of passengers like Mrs. Marcus was lost in a murky ether, with the passengers used as a collective symbol for the world's indifference to the fate of Europe's Jews, but bleached of their individual human stories. It was assumed, incorrectly it has turned out, that nearly all of them died after Western Europe came under the murderous sway of the Nazis.

But for three years, two research historians at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington have been tracing what happened to every single passenger and fleshing out their stories as well as they can. **They have learned that about half the passengers, Mrs. Marcus among them, managed through pluck, endurance and the whims of fortune to survive the war.**

[...]

Mrs. Marcus, they found out last fall, did not die in Auschwitz, where the Nazi records said she had been sent. For the last 50 years, she has been living in a tidy apartment in Washington Heights in Manhattan and working as a bookkeeper for the New York office of the Jesuits.

[...]

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